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ARABIC-ANDALUSIAN CASIDAS

ARABIC-ANDALUSIAN CASIDAS

TRANSLATED
WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY
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Some of these casidas have appeared in *The Adelphi*, *Life and Letters*, *The Listener* and *The Wind and the Rain*. I am grateful to the Editors for permission to reprint them here.

I must also acknowledge my great indebtedness to the scholarship of Dr. García Gómez, which made this book possible: and to Professor R. A. Nicholson's most interesting *Literary History of the Arabs* to which the reader is referred for a full account of the whole of which this book represents a small part.

I thank too Señor Juan Ramón Jiménez for his permission to quote his short poem, 'Epitafio de un Muchacho Muerto en Abril'; Mr. Walter de la Mare for the lines from 'Arabia'; and Professor J. B. Trend for the short extract from his book, 'Alfonso the Sage'.

H. M.

INTRODUCTION

THE eminent Arabic scholar, Doctor Emilio García Gómez, refers to the Arabic-Andalusian casidas as *deliciosas arabescos literarios, verdaderas Alhambbras verbales*—two phrases which admirably indicate their true nature. They are notable, not for psychological depth, spiritual fervour, or intellectual insight, but for the brilliance of their imagery and for their grace. Indeed, this imagery is so marked a feature that few casidas now exist in full. They are fragments, the ruins of more formal and rigid structures, which have been quarried for quotations, so that they endure only in the museum of other men's work.

It is possible to date the beginning of the Golden Age of Arabic poetry somewhere about the first decade of the sixth century after Christ. During the next hundred years brilliant singers all over Arabia and Syria shaped a poetical dialect and a body of the rules of verse-composition that set a fashion which has dominated all but a few challenging spirits under the 'Abbasids (750—1258), from the beginnings to our own time.

The most polished form was that of the casida, an ode which may be called, from the derivation of its name, 'a poem with a purpose'. There is some dispute as to what this purpose was; but since casidas are so honeyed with flattery of the leader to whom they were addressed, it is likely that their purpose was to persuade him towards some rich reward of the poet. An alternative suggestion is that the name is derived from a verb meaning 'to break', and refers to their structure—because a casida consists of lines 'every one of which is divided into two halves with a common end-rhyme: thus the whole poem is *broken*, as it were, into two halves'.

The number of lines in a casida varies between twenty-five and a hundred. Of these the two halves of the first line rhyme

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together, with the same rhyme—which is usually feminine—repeated once in every subsequent line of the poem. It is obvious that a monorhyme running through a poem of some length demands a mastery of technique and great ingenuity if the ear is not to be wearied; and this relief is gained through subtle variations of rhythm.

The metre of Arabic poetry was quantitative, though it is probable that word-accent contributed variations in the flow of the verse. The Arabic poet might use any one of the sixteen metres specified by Halil in the sixth century; only one—that of a popular, extempor poetry something like the Spanish *copla*—being barred, as not fitted to the dignity of the *casida*.

Besides the formal structure of the verse, the content of the *casida* was subject to severe rules. Usually, though not invariably, the poet began with an erotic prelude, following it with a description of a journey undertaken to soften his grief at the loss of love. This gave him ample opportunity to describe the beauties or the loneliness of the desert; to tell of the more 'poetic' beasts he encountered, such as the wild ass, the ostrich, and the gazelle. But he rarely, if ever, mentioned the equally common jerboa, the hare, or the panther; probably because their introduction had not been sanctioned by convention. He then went on to speak enthusiastically of his mount, whether horse or camel; he would tell of the hospitality of those who entertained him, and whom he repaid with soaring, exuberant flattery; he might attack bitterly the enemies that surrounded him, and fling at them his sharpest satire. Then his nostalgia for home gave him licence to speak of the glories, the generosity, the sympathies of his lord; and the poem might end with a broad hint of the poet's immediate needs. Almost all these elements are represented in the fragments versified in the succeeding pages, so that the reader should have no difficulty in assigning them to their original parts of the whole *casida* from which they have, in time, fallen.

Since then, the *casida* allowed little variation in its structure or main thread, the Arabic poet was compelled to discover ever

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more and more striking imagery if his poem was to achieve its 'purpose' and attract the rewarding admiration of the lord. As a result, it lost its unity. It became, in Professor R. A. Nicholson's words, 'a series of pictures by the same hand or, to employ an Eastern trope, of pearls various in size and quality threaded on a necklace.'

All these conventions were imported into Spain. It is true that, from the middle of the seventh century, a more personal note comes in, especially in the love-prelude; but the talk is still of desert-wanderings, even in the green valleys of Andalusia; of the camel, though that animal was not seen in Spain till the time of Yusuf the Almorávid, who died in 1107; and of the yearning of an exile, though the poet might be enjoying all the luxury of court-life in Córdoba or Seville. But the softer landscape and the wider range of colours in Andalusia gave a greater scope to the poet in his search for images; and in that search he found too a more deeply satisfying love of natural beauty than had, perhaps, been possible to poets living in splendid cities balanced almost precariously on the edge of the desert.

The Moslems entered Andalusia at the beginning of the eighth century; and after defeating Roderic the Goth near Trafalgar, rapidly subdued the whole country. But Spain did not for some years enjoy a settled prosperity. The religious schisms and family feuds that were splitting Africa, Syria and the Yemen, plunged this new province of the Arab world into anarchy.

In 756, however, Abd al-Rahman I, of the defeated house of Umayya and fugitive from the victorious 'Abbasids in the metropolis, by supreme guile and bravery made himself master of the capital city of Córdoba. He needed, and exercised, extraordinary tact, vigour, and skill in the control of his mixed population of Arabs, Berbers, and Christians; though both he and his immediate successors had much trouble with the rival sects and races, with jealous princelings and ambitious clergy. But in 912, his descendant Abd al-Rahman III (912—961) began a long reign in

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which he welded into one Andalusian nation the indigenous people and the invading Moslems. On his death the splendid empire was broken up, and the disorderly history of Spain in the eleventh century is only paralleled by that of Italy in the fifteenth.

But although it was an age of political discord, society had reached a point of refinement in grace and subtlety which had not before been equalled, and may not since have been surpassed. The influences in this culture were chiefly those of Bagdad and Aleppo, from which came the slave-singers who set the poetic fashion of the times. One of the most famous of these was Ziryab, *El Pájaro Negro*, who had been expelled from the Bagdad of Harun al-Rashid through the jealousy of his own master. Ziryab was nobly received at the court of Abd al-Rahman II (821—852), to which he brought the latest refinements both in song and in living from the splendid east: such as a new hair-style with a fringe, the eating of asparagus, and the use of table-services of crystal-glass.

From this time the courts of Córdoba and Seville took their place among the most civilized of the world; whilst learned men from Andalusia travelled in pursuit of knowledge to Africa and Egypt, to the Holy Cities of Arabia, to the great capitals of Syria and Iraq, and across the Oxus—a few even reaching China. There was a lively exchange of ideas; and the library of Hakam II held nearly half a million volumes. This was a king determined to spread culture among all his people. Out of his own purse he founded and maintained twenty-seven free schools in Córdoba alone, at a time when the Christian kings of the North were living the meagre life of villagers, with as few ideas as pence. Hakam made the University of Córdoba a name in the whole world.

The fall of the Spanish Umayyads in the first half of the eleventh century left Córdoba a republic and a mere provincial city. Though she was still the literary capital of Spain, she was rapidly being challenged by Seville, Almería, Badajoz, Toledo, Málaga, and Valencia. The chief of these was Seville, governed

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by the family of the 'Abbádids; the most notable of whom were Mutadid, a ferocious tyrant but a man of letters, his son Mutamid (1068—1091), and his grandson Radi, King of Ronda, both of them poets of an exquisite gift.

This was the time of some of Andalusia's subtlest and most graceful poets: Ben Zaydun, the poet of love; Ben Ammar of Silves, the friend of Mutamid, whose bitterness it was to see his own and his friend's life shattered; the brothers Qabturnuh, with their delicately melancholy verse; Ben Sara of Santarén, and a host of lesser singers. It was a time when a song could earn a vizirate, and a poet had the heart of a king because kings had the soul of a poet; when, as Dr. García Gómez remarks, 'washerwomen passed from the banks of the stream to a throne, and kings from a throne to death or to exile. . . . Its sign is a ruin . . .'; for the peace of Seville was broken in its turn by the fury and fanatical scorn of the Berber tribes of the Sahara, whom Mutamid had called in to aid him against his rivals, and who stayed to deprive him of throne and liberty. But from his prison in Agmat, Mutamid never ceased to lament his misfortune in haunting verse.

In spite of all the political unrest, the following period of over a century was one of the greatest in the history of Arabic-Andalusian poetry. The Berber fanaticism was short-lived; and under the two dynasties succeeding the 'Abbádids, Spain reached its highest peak in Moslem and Jewish thought. To this time belong the great thinkers and scientists known to the world as Avempace, Averroës, Avicbron, Rabbi ben Ezra, and Maimonides. Nor did poetry die. It shaped itself for a while to the new times, in the hands of Ben Jafacha, one of the greatest of Andalusian poets, famous for his descriptions of gardens; of Ben al-Zaqqaq; of Abu Salt Umayya, the wanderer; and of Turtusi. But poetry was beginning to live on its past, to sing in a minor, elegiac mode, and to spend all its energy in a more and more refined ingenuity of technique.

But it was Andalusia's political life, rather than its culture, that decayed; till both went down in a storm of blood and

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treachery and ill-faith before the rulers of the Christian north; and till Archbishop Ximenes, in his zeal for Christian morality and national unity, burned the books, lusting to destroy the culture of seven centuries in one fierce day.

It is an interesting, but perhaps unprofitable, speculation to consider how far Arabic-Andalusian influences may have affected the work of some modern Spanish poets. The very climatic factors mentioned earlier, which made for a sharp bright imagery in the earlier poetry, may account fully for the same virtue in the work of Manuel Machado, Juan Ramón Jiménez, Rafael Alberti, and Manuel Altolaguirre—all men of Andalusia. But, to take only one instance, there is a close resemblance between the brief fragments I have versified and the near-imagist work of one of the greatest living poets, Juan Ramón Jiménez. Here, a typical example, is a whole poem of his: -

EPITAFIO DE UN MUCHACHO MUERTO EN ABRIL

Murió. Mas no lloradlo!
¿No vuelve abril, cada año,
desnudo, en flor, cantando,
en su caballo blanco?

of which this is a translation: -

EPITAPH ON A BOY THAT DIED IN APRIL

He died. But do not weep.
Does April not each year return,
naked, in flower, and singing
riding his white horse?

Further, as long ago as 1926, Professor J. B. Trend hailed the discovery of a new 'Poet of "Arabia"' in Federico García Lorca. Lorca acknowledges a clear debt to the passionate song, the *cante jondo*, of the Andalusian gypsies, a people apart, in that they are perhaps the last 'natural' reservoir of the Arabic influence on Spain. Some have found a close similarity between the *cante jondo* and the negro 'blues', and have traced them to a common source in Africa. This may or may not be true. But as Professor Trend remarks, in order to hear García Lorca's

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poetry aright 'a reader must begin by saying (Walter de la Mare's) exquisite English poem over to himself. He must "descry her gliding streams", he must

Hear her strange lutes on the green banks
Ring loud with the grief and delight
Of the dim-silked, dark-haired Musicians
In the brooding silence of night.'

To gain anything from the versified translations of these casidas, the reader must make the same imaginative effort. Perhaps some notes of the same music may tremble out of the darkness of time.

BEN ABD RABBIHI OF CORDOBA

Ninth-Tenth Century

WHITE SKIN

I proclaim a peerless girl
And see her as a pearl
Whose candour maiden-shame
To red carnelian can inflame.

Ah, so pure the child's complexion
That when there I look,
As in a limpid brook
I see my own reflection.

BEN FARACH OF JAEN

Tenth Century

CHASTITY

I would not, when she would submit,
Let Satan's prompting be obeyed.

Her face, uncovered, lit the night
That raised its veil of shade.

But God's command forbidding lust
Stood like a chamberlain to trust,
Guarding the gates of passion;
My instinct still must be repressed,
Rebelling in this fashion.

So beside her now I lie
All night and long for rest—
A camel's thirsty colt whose muzzle
Keeps him from the breast;
Or in a garden where the eye
Alone devours—
I'm no abandoned beast to guzzle,
Pasturing on flowers.

PRINCE MARWAN BEN ABD AL-RAHMAN

Tenth-Eleventh Century

THE JAIL

Murky and black this dungeon
As the night;
And shadowy every part,
But at its heart
How deep is the gloom.

And yet outside
'The flowers are glowing white,
As if an ivory well
Holds ink with which I write.

BEN DARRACH AL-QASTALLI OF CORDOBA

Tenth-Eleventh Century

THE WHITE LILY

The hands of spring have gilded
 Above their stem
The shapely towers
 Of the lily's flowers,
Surmounting them
 With silver merlons
Which defenders hold,
 Ringed round their prince
With swords of gold.

BEN SUHAYD OF CORDOBA

Eleventh Century

THE STORM

In the dark the flowers
With groping mouth
Seek the udders of the showers
To quench their drouth.

The black battalions of cloud
With a plunder of water
File—in majesty how proud! ---
With lightning to the slaughter.

BEN SUHAYD OF CORDOBA

Eleventh Century

AFTER THE REVEL

When, grown weary with delight,
She closed her eyes, and when the night-
Patrol grew weary too, and slept,

Towards her fearfully I crept
Like one whom love had made adept
For just this touch of her to scheme;

I slid towards her like a dream,
Insensibly, that I might seem
In her soft breathing like a mote;

I kiss the whiteness of her throat
Till hunger for her red mouth grips
Me tight—how sweetly then time slips
Till shadows, smiling, part their lips
To show the teeth of morning white.

BEN HAZM OF CORDOBA

Eleventh Century

I SOUGHT TO SPLIT MY HEART

I sought to split with a little knife
My heart and gaol you there,
Then lock my breast, that all my life
Till Judgment Day I need not share
The sight of you.

And when I died
You should abide within that narrow room,
My heart your catacomb.

BEN HAZM OF CORDOBA

Eleventh Century

YOU CAME

You came a little while before
The Christians rang their bell,
And when the half-moon in the sky
— The brow above an old man's eye —
Softly glanced on heaven's floor. . .
But at your coming darkness blazed
As with the Almighty's bow,
Night like a peacock seemed to glow
With colours proudly raised.

BEN ZAYDUN OF CORDOBA

Eleventh Century

TWO FRAGMENTS

I

'The world is strange
For lack of you;
Times change their common hue —
The day is black, but very night
With you was shining white.

II

Two secrets in the heart of night
We were until the light
Of busybody day
Gave both of us away.

BEN AMMAR OF SILVES

Eleventh Century

BELOVED

A shy gazelle that love confines,
Her eyes narcissi, and a white
And slender lily for her height;

Her earrings make sweet wanton signs,
Her anklets dancing to the sound
Of the zone that clasps her round.

MUTAMID, KING OF SEVILLE

Eleventh Century

THE MOON, THE STARS, AND A KING

When the moon in splendour glides
In the darkened west,
The stars advancing at her sides
Raise a flag the whole world sees
— The glittering Pleiades.

So I a king on earth, between
My dark battalions and
The loveliest girls this world has seen,
Behold their shields dispersing night
And these whose wine brings light.

And though to a zither slaves may sing
A soft seductive tune,
For all that, my young men can ding
A music that still merrier goes
On the helmets of their foes!

MUTAMID, KING OF SEVILLE

Eleventh Century

TO HIS CHAINS WHEN A PRISONER
IN AGMAT

Oh chains, can you not see
That I submit?
Will you not pity me
One little whit?

You drank my blood and ate
— For all my groans —
My flesh. And hungry yet
You bite my bones.

Abu Hasim, my son,
Seeing me chained,
Heartbroken has gone
Grievously pained;

Regard a harmless child
Coming with tears
To plead, guileless and mild,
Stifling his fears.

His little sisters too,
How like him in feature!
Embittered because of you
By this harsh fruit!

But some are still too small
And, undistressed,
Can only weep and call
For their mother's breast.

ABU-L-HASAN AL-HUSRI THE BLIND

Eleventh Century

MOURNING IN ANDALUSIA

In Andalusia clothes are white
That folk in mourning wear;
The custom's right I bear its truth
In every greying hair
That grieves for my lost youth.

BEN MUQANA OF LISBON

Eleventh Century

DAWN

The wing of the dark withdrawn
From the sleeping dawn
Is like a crow that flies away
Revealing now her white
And hidden eggs of light.

Eleventh Century

THE PIGEON

A bough is weeping in the stream. . .
Green island, green. . . And I dream. . .
A pigeon moans, disquiets me. . .

Her breast is lapis lazuli,
Her throat a pale pistachio-green,
Hazel the wing she turns to preen. . .
Her throbbing throat disquiets me.

Over the ruby of her eyes
She flickers lids of pearl
With an edge of gold. . . But when she cries
Her note disquiets me. . .

She sits the branch as if a throne,
Hiding her throat within a fold
Of her bright wing. . . And still her moan
Is in the air, disquieting me.

But when my tears are my reply,
Above the branch she spreads her wings
Bearing my heart away, to fly
Above despair and mortal things
Where I can never go. . . Ah where?
O weeping bough, I do not know.

AL-RADI BI-LLAH YAZID, KING OF RONDA

Eleventh Century

THEY PASSED BY

Unsummoned in the twilight they passed by,
So close to me they set my heart afire.

Why wonder that they stir up my desire?
Water but glimpsed makes thirsty men more dry.

IDRIS BEN AL-YAMAN OF IBIZA

Eleventh Century

CUPS

The cups weighed heavy when at first
 Their emptiness was mine,
But how they lightened when their thirst
 Was deeply slaked with wine;

They seemed to put on wings for flight,
 As my own body, stilled
And heavy, grows more light
 When with God's spirit filled.

ABD AL-AZIZ BEN ABRA OF GRANADA

Eleventh Century

THE BEAUTY-SPOT

A mole on Ahmad's cheek
Draws all men's eyes to seek
The love they swear reposes
In a garden there,
'That breathing bed of roses
In a Nubian's care.

BEN JAFACHA OF ALCIRA

Eleventh-Twelfth Century

THE BLACK SWIMMER

A negro swims about a pool
Whose probity displays
Its pebble-bed, replies
My own cool gaze
— The water iris-blue,
The negro-pupil of an eye.

BEN JAFACHA OF ALCIRA

Eleventh-Twelfth Century

THE RIVER

Ah God, how sweetly flows the river;
It disturbs my hot desire
More than the lips of a maiden lover;

Now like a bracelet curves, and now
The hours of summer bring
Those flowers that ring it like a Milky Way.

Have you not seen
— As like a sliver it twines —
Its silver that laces a tunic of green!

And the branches are like lashes
That fringe a light-blue eye,
And the wind with passionate play
Inflames the boughs. . . .
As now I pay my vows with wine's
Gold liquor, and my hand is stained.

ABU BAKR AL-TURTUSI

Eleventh-Twelfth Century

ABSENCE

Endlessly I search the skies
To find a star lit by your eyes;

I ask each traveller what land
Breathes fragrantly of you. I stand

Lonely, the wind upon my face
To tell what news there is, what trace. . . .

But when a song recalls your name
I walk the roads, endless and same,

Seeking a face that bears the sign
Of having seen you, one like mine.

QADI IYAD

Eleventh-Twelfth Century

FIELDS OF GRAIN

See the shaded plain
Where fields of ripening grain
 Bend before the winds,
Routed troops of horse
Bewildered from their course,
And poppies bleed like wounds.

BEN SARA OF SANTAREN

Eleventh-Twelfth Century

THE BRAZIER

The brazier was our antidote tonight
When under darkness scorpions of cold
Sharply stung us.

Keen with light
It snipped a warm great rug whose fold
Hid us from the searching nails of frost.

We ringed the furnace like a cup
Of glowing wine, for every man to sup
Deeply without cost.

Sometimes it whimm'd towards us, then
Turned away again;
Like an impatient mother — now the breast
Now thrusting us, half-satisfied, to rest.

BEN SARA OF SANTAREN

Eleventh-Twelfth Century

POOL WITH TURTLES

Deep is the pool whose overflow
In the cool bright showers
Is like an eye weeping below
Lashes of quivering flowers.

Look — the merry turtles sport
Like Christians to the field
That sidle, frolic, and cavort
Bearing a casual shield.

BEN SARA OF SANTAREN

Eleventh-Twelfth Century

THE SHOOTING STAR

The watch-star saw a devil-spy, that came
 On evil work,
 At heaven's gate lurk
And leapt against him in a path of flame;

 And seemed a burning cavalier
 Whose swift career
Unbinds his turban till it streams
Behind, so jewelled that it gleams.

ABU SALT Umayya of Denia

Eleventh-Twelfth Century

THE WHITE HORSE

White as the morning-star
At sunrise, proud and cold,
His saddle gleaming gold,
He steps before me into battle. . . .

Then how envious are
The Captains. One cries loud:
'Who has flung the Pleiades
For bridle on the dawn?
And with the half-moon for a saddle
Tames the lightning down?'

ABU-L-HASAN BEN AL-QABTURNUH OF BADAJOZ

Twelfth Century

IN BATTLE

Sulayma glowed within my mind
When the battle seethed
As my own body burns
When I am from her side;

I thought I saw among the spears
Her slenderness and grace,
And when to me they leaned
I longed for their embrace.

ABU AL-AZIZ BEN AL-QABTURNUH

Twelfth Century

INVITATION

The day is dabbled with dew;
The cheek of the earth has a new
Soft down of grass.

Your friend invites

You to his simple, few delights:
To taste the sizzling pot
Dispensing such a smell;
And perfumes; and a pleasant spot;
A jug of wine as well. . . .
Of course, there's more to item if
You please — but why should I offend
So old a friend
By being too politely stiff?

AHMAD BEN WADDAH OF MURCIA

Twelfth Century

THE BOW

I wonder at the bow's ingratitude,
 Its treachery to the dove!
Once, as a bough within the wood,
 It whispered only love;
But now its spiteful shafts pursue —
If human, what more could it do?

BEN AL-ZAQQAQ OF ALCIRA

Twelfth Century

ROSES

On the river scattered roses
That a breath of wind
Into echelons composes;
Or as from a wound
Blood upon a breastplate, worn
By a hero whose advance
Is undelayed, though sharply torn
By a hostile lance.

Twelfth Century

THE WEAVER

Her fingers with the shuttle sport
Over the loom,
As day after day they play
Weaving my doom.

Pressing the woof with her hands
With subtle care
Or tightening all with her foot,
She seems a doe in a snare.

IBRAHIM BEN UTMAN OF CORDOBA

Twelfth Century

APOLOGIA

Why tax me with inconsequence
Because a singing voice disturbs
My trembling sense?

I am a man whom reason curbs,
Yet feel what reason cannot know;
As from the self-same bough
You shape the fighting-bow
And the lute lamenting now.

BEN ABI RUH OF ALGECIRAS

Twelfth Century

RIVER OF HONEY

Stop by the River of Honey and ask
Of the night
What happened there before the light,
Or censuring eyes took us to task;

We drank the mouth's sweet wine
And plucked the rose of shame;
Our limbs like boughs would intertwine. .
Reflected there, each candle-flame
With steady gleam
Was a lance's point
On the shield of the stream.

But weariness makes all things yield,
And sadly now I hear
The nightingale's complaint
But my two lips are sealed.

BEN AISA OF VALENCIA

Twelfth Century

THE DRUNKARD

There was a garden in his face,
Where bloomed the blushing rose,
— No wonder that you loved the place!
But now in wilder fashion
Love it with a deeper passion
— Look, the violet of his nose!

ABU AHMAD BEN HAYYUN OF SEVILLE

Twelfth Century

THE GIRL WITH THE BEAUTY-SPOTS

Once when her beauty-spots had snared
 My breathless heart
I said: Is all your whiteness shared
Sweet favours on your part?
And do these spots that stain
 Now image your disdain?

She answered with a smile
 Of roguish guile:
My father is a royal scribe,
And once when I came near
He thought that I should probe
State-secrets and, in fear,
He flicked his pen and on my face
 Left this inky trace. . . .

SAD AL-JAYR OF VALENCIA

Twelfth Century

THE DRAW-WELL

Dear God!

 The draw-well overflows
 With sweet, sad water
Down to a garden where the trees
Heavily fruited groan. . . .
And doves tell it their moan
With a throbbing throat,
 And it replies
 With a singing tone.

It seems a lover inconsolable
That endlessly walks on
And on about the one sweet spot
Where love was born, and unforgot
For ever cries on her that's gone.

And like the channels grooved by grief
 In human cheeks,
Its conduits give the sad relief
 That a deep heart seeks.

ABU-L-QASIM AL-MANISI OF SEVILLE

Twelfth Century

RAIN OVER THE RIVER

The wind's hand on the river
Rippling a thousand-fold
Devises with a subtle grace
A smithry of bright gold.
And when the forging's over
Of the mesh of a cuirass,
The rain with its tiny rivets
Links them into place.

ABU AMIR AL-HAMMARA

Twelfth Century

INSOMNIA

The bird of sleep would nest
Deep in my eyes, and rest
But sees the lashes there
And flies, dreading a snare.

BEN SAFAR AL-MARINI OF ALMERIA

Twelfth Century

THE TIDE IN THE GUADALQUIVIR

The boyish wind in playfulness
Tore the river's flimsy dress
Who, overflowing helter-skelter
For revenge, hears doves that mock it
From the shelter of a thicket,
And ashamed resumes her place,
Veiling with morning mist her face.

BEN JARUF OF CORDOBA

Twelfth-Thirteenth Century

THE DANCER

Her flickering movements play
 About my heart,
But with her clothes away
Her body is white heat;

Like a branch she sways
 In the sighing air,
Or like a deer that plays
Within a secret lair.

She dances through my mind
 On mocking feet
As trembling humankind
Are spurned by fate;

And like a tempered blade
 With hilt to point,
She bends as if God made
Her body without joint.

ABU BEN HARIQ OF VALENCIA

Twelfth-Thirteenth Century

THE OARS OF GALLEYS

It seems, when Noah's flood was young,
That serpents filled his hold;
And even yet are not grown bold
Nor slough their ancient fright,
But through the ports with quivering tongue
They test the water's height.

ABU ZAKKARIYA, KING OF TUNIS

Thirteenth Century

THE LANCE

Swarthy she was, but the fight that day
Covered her head with a dust of grey,
For youth to age must still give way.

When against the coming foe
In my hand she plays her part,
She seems the rope with which I draw
Blood from the well of his heart.

BEN SAHL, JEW OF SEVILLE

Thirteenth Century

BANKS OF THE GUADALQUIVIR

The elms that in the garden tower
Like lances at whose crest
A silken pennant dances, now rebel
Against the river lest it swell
Exultant in its power,
Proud in a glittering coat of mail
Wind-forged at its behest.

Time after time the waves repel
The plying trees now fiercely bent,
But at the last they must submit,
And with a murmur their defeat
Sweetly lament.

BEN SAID AL-MAGRIBI

Thirteenth Century

THE BATTLE

Ah God! the standards of the cavalry
Wheeling like birds in revelry
Before they dive on 'Thy foes' devilry.

The lances punctuate the writing
Of the swords; the dust of fighting
Dries the hurried scrawls of pain,
And blood perfumes the parchment of the plain.

BEN SAID AL-MAGRIBI

Thirteenth Century

THE WIND

That bawd of a wind will boldly lift
'The unwary beauty's decent shift,
Wear down the bough — love's trembling fool!
— To kiss the upturned face of the pool.

And so, as lovers' go-between,
It breathes what they dare only mean.

BEN LUBBAL, QADI OF JEREZ

Thirteenth Century

FIESTA ON THE RIVER

Look — by my life! — each little boat
 In its swift career
Like a horse in proud delight;

Bare until now the river's throat
 But in the gloom of night
Is hung with jewels, as the candles gleam
 And fling their darts
Into the shuddering water. And the boats
Upon their oars' slight, frantic feet
Before the winged vessels run
 As from a falcon's sweep
 Fleetly runs the hare.

Thirteenth Century

THE GALLEY

The galley moved like a swimmer
Too skilled to use his feet,
Swift as a swooping seabird
At a falcon's angry threat;
Or like an eye that flashes
And the air explores,
Whose lids are banked by the lashes
Of the slender, quivering oars.

BEN AL-SABUNI OF SEVILLE

Thirteenth Century

THE RED ROBE

White body veiled in clothes
The colour of a rose,
O like the moon she walks
In the twilight glow;

As if, when her eyes probe
And my heart's blood is shed,
She dries them on the robe
Dyeing it red.

BEN RAIÁ OF SEVILLE

Thirteenth Century

THE FOUNTAIN

Fair the fountain flinging high
Its shooting stars against the sky,
Like acrobats they leap and fly.

Impetuous snakes of water writhe
Towards the basin, darting, lithe. . . .

But in the basin now content
Forgetting its troubles,
Shows in its merriment
Teeth of glittering bubbles.

